To provide for the Common Defense

P61

Pierce Butler

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Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution
^ Bicentennial Series

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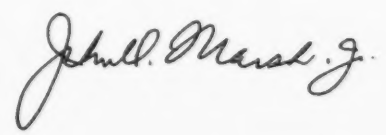
Introduction

In September 1987 the United States commemorates the bicentennial of the signing of the Constitution. Twenty-two of the thirty-nine signers of the Constitution were veterans of the Revolutionary War. Their experiences in that conflict made them deeply conscious of the need for a strong central government that would prevail against its enemies, yet one that would safeguard the individual liberties and the republican form of government for which they had fought. Their solution is enshrined in the Constitution. The President of the United States is the Commander in Chief of the nation's military forces. But it is the Congress that has the power to raise and support those forces, and to declare war. The Founding Fathers established for all time the precedent that the military, subordinated to the Congress, would remain the servant of the Republic. That concept is the underpinning of the American military officer. These twenty-two men were patriots and leaders in every sense of the word: they fought the war, they signed the Constitution, and they forged the new government. They all went on to careers of distinguished public service in the new Republic. Their accomplishments should not be forgotten by those who enjoy the fruits of their labors. Nor should we forget the fortieth man whose name appears on the Constitution. The Secretary was the twenty-third Revolutionary veteran in the Convention, who continued his service to the nation as one of its first civil servants.

This pamphlet was prepared by the U.S. Army Center of Military History with the hope that it will provide you with the background of a great American; stimulate you to learn more about him; and help you enjoy and appreciate the bicentennial.



John O. Marsh, Jr.
Secretary of the Army

PIERCE BUTLER
South Carolina

Pierce Butler, who represented South Carolina at the Constitutional Convention, was a man of startling contrasts. As late as 1772 he was a ranking officer in those British units charged with suppressing the growing colonial resistance to Parliament. In fact, a detachment from his unit, the 29th Regiment of Foot, had fired the shots in the "Boston Massacre" of 1770, thereby dramatically intensifying the confrontation between the colonies and England. But by 1779 Butler, now an officer in South Carolina's militia and a man with a price on his head, was organizing American forces to fight the invading Redcoats. Butler lost his considerable estates and fortune during the British occupation of South Carolina, but at the end of the Revolutionary War he was among the first to call for reconciliation with the Loyalists and a renewal of friendly relations with the former enemy. Although an aristocrat to the manor born, Butler became a leading spokesman for the frontiersmen and impoverished western settlers. Finally, this patriot, always a forceful and eloquent advocate of the rights of the common man during the debate over the Constitution, was also the proud owner of a sizable number of slaves.

The unifying force in this fascinating career was Butler's strong and enduring sense of nationalism. An Irish nobleman, he severed his ties with the old world to embrace the concept of a permanent union of the thirteen states. His own military and political experiences then led him to the conviction that a strong central government, as the bedrock of political and economic security, was essential to protect the rights not only of his own social class and adopted state but also of all classes of citizens and all the states.

THE PATRIOT

Pierce Butler was the third son of Sir Richard Butler, the fifth Baronet of Cloughgrenan and a member of the Irish Parliament. Traditionally British aristocrats directed younger sons into the military or the church, and Butler's father was no exception. In the honored fashion of the times, he bought his son a commission in the 22d Regiment of Foot (today's Cheshire Regiment). Butler demonstrated both military skill and the advantages of powerful and wealthy parents in his subsequent career in the British Army. His regiment came to North America in 1758 to participate in the French and Indian War and served in the campaigns that resulted in the capture of Canada from the French. Butler later transferred to the 29th Foot (today's Worcestershire and Sherwood Forresters Regiment), before returning to Ireland in 1762.

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The overwhelming success of the forces of the British Empire and its allies ended French territorial claims in North America and brought about profound changes in the nature of the mother country's relationship with its American colonies. To occupy Canada and other new lands won during the war, Parliament for the first time ordered the permanent stationing of large British garrisons in North America. Because the government had incurred heavy war debts, Parliament chose to support these troops by levying new taxes on the colonists. Americans generally disagreed with Parliament over the need for the garrisons, arguing that their local militias could handle the defense of the colonies. They also opposed the new taxes that began with the Stamp Act of 1765.

Butler's regiment was serving on garrison duty in Nova Scotia at the time, but he could not long escape becoming embroiled in the growing controversy. In 1768 the intensity of protests over Parliament's taxes in Massachusetts led London to order the 29th Foot, along with a second infantry regiment, to Boston to maintain the King's peace. In 1771, the year after the "Massacre," Butler, now a major, married Mary Middleton, the daughter of a wealthy South Carolina planter and colonial leader. Marriage led him to seek new directions, for when the 29th received orders to return to Great Britain in 1773, he decided to leave the army. He sold his commission and used the proceeds to purchase a plantation in the coastal region of South Carolina, adapting to the lifestyle of a southern landowner with apparent ease. Management skills learned in the military undoubtedly proved useful as he increased his land holdings to over 10,000 acres. He also began to accumulate a small fleet of coastal vessels to support his expanding business ventures.

When war broke out between Great Britain and the colonies in 1775, Butler joined several other former British officers (including the future generals Horatio Gates, Charles Lee, and Richard Montgomery) in casting his lot with the American cause. In Butler's case the success of his business interests as well as the important role played by the Middleton family in the Patriot movement in South Carolina clearly influenced his decision. Butler's father-in-law had been the president of the First Continental Congress, and a brother-in-law would soon sign the Declaration of Independence. Butler himself lost little time in expressing his patriotic sentiments by standing for local election. He began his public service in 1776 when his neighbors elected him to a seat in the South Carolina legislature, a post that he continued to hold until 1789.

THE SOLDIER

Although bad health prevented Butler from assuming an active combat role, he offered his military talents to his state, and in early 1779 Governor John Rutledge turned to the former Redcoat to help reorganize South Carolina's defenses. Butler assumed the post of the state's adjutant general,

Miniature by unknown artist, of unknown date, National Archives and Records Administration.

a position that carried the rank of brigadier general, although he continued to prefer to be addressed as major, his highest combat rank.

The decision to reorganize South Carolina's defenses followed in the wake of a shift in Britain's war strategy. By 1778 the King and his ministers found themselves faced with a new military situation. Their forces in the northern and middle states had reached a stalemate with Washington's continentals, now more adequately supplied and better trained after Valley Forge. The British also faced the prospect of France entering the war as an active partner of the Americans. In response, they adopted a "southern strategy." Assuming that the many Loyalists in the southern states would rally to the Crown if supported by regular troops, they planned a conquest of the rebellious colonies one at a time, moving north from Georgia. They launched their new strategy with the capture of Savannah in December 1778.

Butler joined in the effort to mobilize South Carolina's citizen-soldiers to repulse the threatened British invasion and later helped prepare the state units used in the counterattack designed to drive the enemy from Georgia. During the operation, which climaxed with an attempted investiture of Savannah, Butler served as a volunteer aide to General Lachlan McIntosh. The hastily raised and poorly prepared militia troops were no match for the well trained British defenders, and the effort to relieve Savannah ended in failure.

In 1780 the British captured Charleston, and with it most of South Carolina's civil government and military forces. Butler, as part of a command

group deliberately left outside the city, escaped. During the next two years he employed his considerable military talents in developing a counterstrategy to defeat the enemy's southern operations. He and his fellow South Carolinians, along with their neighbors in occupied portions of Georgia and North Carolina, refused to submit to London's demand that they surrender. Instead, they organized a resistance movement. Butler, as adjutant general, worked with former members of the militia and Continental Army veterans such as Francis Marion and Thomas Sumter to integrate their various partisan efforts into a unified campaign, in conjunction with the operations of the Southern Army under the command of Horatio Gates and later Nathanael Greene.

These partisan tactics involved considerable expense and personal risk for Butler who, as a former Royal officer, remained a special target for the British occupation forces. Several times he barely avoided capture. Once, surprised by the sudden arrival of enemy dragoons in the middle of the night, he escaped by sneaking from his home dressed only in his nightshirt. On another occasion, a British regiment, repeatedly denounced by Butler for plundering civilian properties—he called it a "band of jailbirds"—placed a bounty on his head. Throughout the closing phases of the southern campaign he personally contributed cash and supplies to help sustain the American forces and also assisted in the administration of prisoner of war facilities.

THE STATESMAN

Military operations in the latter months of the Revolution left Butler a poor man. Many of his plantations and ships were destroyed, and the international trade on which the majority of his income depended was in shambles. These economic realities forced him to travel to Europe when the war ended in an effort to secure loans and establish new markets. Betraying a singular tolerance for a foe who had caused him much personal harm, Butler took the occasion to enroll his son in a London school and to engage a new minister from among the British clergy for his church in South Carolina. In late 1785 he returned home, where he became an especially outspoken advocate of reconciliation with former Loyalists and equal representation for the residents of the backcountry. Testifying to his growing political influence, the South Carolina legislature asked Butler to represent the state at the Constitutional Convention that met in Philadelphia in 1787.

Butler's experiences as a soldier and planter-legislator influenced his forceful support for a strong union of the states at the Convention. As a military leader during the campaigns in the south he had come to appreciate the need for a national approach to defense. As a planter and merchant, especially after his trip to Europe, he came to understand that economic growth and inter-

national respect depended upon a strong central government. At the same time, he energetically supported the special interests of his region.

This dual emphasis on national and state concerns puzzled his fellow delegates, just as other apparent inconsistencies would bother associates throughout the rest of his political career. For example, Butler favored ratification of the Constitution, yet absented himself from the South Carolina convention that approved it. Later, he would serve three separate terms in the United States Senate, but this service was marked by several abrupt changes in party allegiance. Beginning as a Federalist, he switched to the Jeffersonian party in 1795, only to become a political independent in 1804. These changes confused the voters of his state, who rejected his subsequent bids for high public offices, although they did elect him three more times to the state legislature as an easterner who spoke on behalf of the west.

Butler retired from politics in 1805 and spent much time in Philadelphia where he had previously established a summer home. He continued his business ventures, becoming one of the wealthiest men in America with huge land holdings in several states. Like other Founding Fathers from his region, Butler also continued to support the institution of slavery. But unlike Washington or Thomas Jefferson, for example, Butler never acknowledged or grasped the fundamental inconsistency in simultaneously defending the rights of the poor and supporting slavery.

The contradictions in this fascinating man led associates to label him an "eccentric" and an "enigma." Within his own lights, however, he followed a steady path along lines which were intended to produce the maximum of liberty and respect for those individuals whom he classed as citizens. His later political maneuverings were animated by his desire to maintain a strong central government, but a government that could never ride roughshod over the rights of the private citizen. He opposed the policies of the Federalists under Alexander Hamilton because he decided that they had sacrificed the interests of westerners and had sought to force their policies on the opposition; he later split with Jefferson and the Democrats for the same reason. Butler never wavered from his central emphasis on the role of the common man. Late in life he summarized his view: "Our System is little better than [a] matter of Experiment, . . . much must depend on the morals and manners of the people at large." This was certainly an interesting view, coming as it did from a former member of the British hereditary aristocracy.

The Congress shall have Power . . .
To raise and support Armies . . . ;
To provide and maintain a Navy;
To provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining, the Militia . . . ;

ARTICLE I, Section 8.

Personal Data

BIRTH: 11 July 1744, in County Carlow, Ireland*
OCCUPATION: Soldier and Planter
MILITARY SERVICE:
Adjutant General,
South Carolina Militia—4 years
PUBLIC SERVICE:
Continental Congress—1 year
United States Senate—10 years
DEATH: 15 February 1822, at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
PLACE OF INTERMENT: Christ Churchyard, Philadelphia

*In 1752 the English-speaking world adopted the Gregorian calendar, thereby adding 11 days to the date. Thus Butler's date of birth was recorded in 1744 as 29 June.

Further Readings

Butler lacks a formal biography. However, details about his life and services are contained in Walter Edgar, et al., compilers, *Biographical Directory of the South Carolina House of Representatives* (4 vols. to date; 1974–); Worthington Ford, compiler, "British Officers Serving in America, 1754–1774," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, 48 (1894) and 49 (1895); Joseph Johnson, *Traditions and Reminiscences, Chiefly of the American Revolution in the South* (1851); Edward McCrady, *History of South Carolina in the Revolution, 1775–80* (1901); Alexander Salley, *Delegates to the Continental Congress from South Carolina* (1927); John Shy, *Toward Lexington: The Role of the British Army in the Coming of the American Revolution* (1965); and John Wolfe, *Jeffersonian Democracy in South Carolina* (1940). Other books which shed light on the creation of the Constitution and the role of the military in the early history of the nation include Sol Bloom, *The Story of the Constitution* (1937); Catherine Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia* (1966); Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist Papers*; Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence* (1971); Merrill Jensen, *Making of the Constitution* (1979); Richard Kohn, *Eagle and Sword* (1975); Clinton Rossiter, *1787: The Grand Convention* (1966); U.S. National Park Service, *Signers of the Constitution* (1976); and Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (1969).

Cover: *Scene of the Signing of the Constitution of the United States*, by Howard Chandler Christy, courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

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